

To-day, however, even as was formerly the case, there is still one trait common to the French peasantry generally. As in other countries there has been, and is still, a great exodus from the rural districts to the towns ; but those who remain at home are distinguished by their earth-hunger, their all-consuming passion for the soil. The historical explanation of this is perhaps as follows : For centuries the peasantry possessed little or nothing, and when the Revolution, at last placed the land in their hands absolutely, a craving which had descended from generation to generation was satisfied. They seized the land eagerly, they clung to it fiercely, fearful lest it should be taken from them, as, for instance, when the Bonrbons returned, and many of the old *noblesse* sought the resumption of their estates. And old-time feelings, the covetous cravings of ancestors, the desperate tenacity of the generation of 1815, have descended to the peasants of to-day, and were perhaps even stronger among those of the Second Empire, with whom Zola proposed to deal in his novel " La Terre."

It was in part on the peasant's brutish ignorance, and more particularly on his earth-hunger, that he resolved to base his book. The following extract from one of his letters¹ will show his intentions :

" ' La Terre' will treat of the French

peasant's passion for the
soil, his long struggle to acquire
possession of it, his crushing
labour, his brief joys and his great
wretchedness. He will be
studied too in connection with religion and
politics, his present
condition being explained by his past
history; even his future
will be indicated, that is the part he may
possibly play in a
Socialist revolution. All that, of course,
will lie beneath the
drama unfolded in the book, the drama of
a father dividing his
i Zola to Yizetelly & Co., Paris, March 24, 1887,